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Students' Justifications for Academic Dishonesty: Call for Action

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine whether university students were engaged in any type of academic dishonesty as well as to look for their justifications for this likely lack of academic integrity. A sample of 500 students and lecturers from different faculties at The American University participated in this study. Findings suggest that although students did not report any severe form of cheating, they showed an inclination towards engaging in academic dishonesty. There was also a mismatch between students' reports and their lecturers' observations with respect to students' amount of cheating.

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1. Introduction

The competitiveness of today's job market and the idea of winning at any price has led to ethical issues and scandals such as forging documents, trading credentials, deceiving and cheating in educational contexts. The situation would be even worse if students feel that they should cheat because everybody else does it, which could be referred to as the notion of neutralization (Haines et al., 1986) or the misconception of "Two wrongs make a right category" (Davis et al., 2009, p. 72). Although academic dishonesty is not a new phenomenon and literature is filled with cases and examples from different contexts (e.g., Baird, 1980; Drake, 1941; Hetherington & Feldman, 1964; Jendreck, 1989), the breadth and wealth of studies after the new millennium (Hulsart & McCarthy, 2009; Lathrop & Foss, 2005; McCabe et al., 2001; McCabe, 2005; Styron & Styron, 2010) points to the severity of this issue in educational contexts. This crisis could undermine the quality of education, which has become integrated with the world of business and economics as the number of private educational institutions is rising, as well as undermining the vision of grooming honest, accountable and trustworthy professionals in the future.

Both individual and psychological factors such as gender, low GPA, age, narcissism, competitive achievement and contextual factors such as the existence of honor codes, disciplinary rules and learning environment were reported to affect students' involvement in cheating (see Bedford et al., 2011). However, the rapid development of technology and the birth of "The digital child" (Layton, 2005) as well as the emergence of new methods and

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techniques of cheating calls for a collaborative effort to mitigate or curb dishonest academic behavior due to its potential to not only deprive teachers of the ability to carry out proper teaching and evaluation, but also to rob students off many learning opportunities in and outside classroom. Therefore, making sense of students' reasons and justifications for cheating or getting involved in academic dishonesty will definitely help raise our awareness as to the appropriate tactics and strategies needed to prevent it from becoming a norm on university campuses, no matter how strong individual factors or students' temptation might seem to be. Thus, due to the scarcity of research done in this area, this study aims to investigate firstly whether students are engaged in any type of cheating and, if so, to identify their justifications for this academic dishonesty; secondly, to find out what faculty members might have observed or perceived regarding these students' cheating.

2. The study

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) Do students' report involvement in any type of academic dishonesty?
- 2) What is the difference between male and female students as to their engagement in academic dishonesty?
- 3) What are lecturers' observations about students' cheating behaviors on exams or assignments?

2.1 Participants

This study was carried out at The American University where students from various countries study different disciplines in English language. A sample of 450 students and 50 lecturers participated in this study. A total of 380 of the students spoke one form of the Turkic language or another and the rest spoke other international languages such as English, Russian, or Arabic. Also, 58% of the sample were male and 42% were female. These students and lecturers were selected randomly from different faculties regardless of their age or year of study.

2.2 Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

Two instruments were employed in this study. A questionnaire was designed in two parts to find out about students' involvement in academic dishonesty. The first part consisted of 12 items on a 'Yes/No' scale to see if students cheat at all, and the second part, which was made up of 25 items on a Likert scale from 'Strongly agree' (5) to 'Strongly disagree' (1), investigated their reasons, justifications and predispositions for cheating provided that their response to the first part was positive. There were also some open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire in case students wanted to leave any further comments and suggestions. This questionnaire was prepared in two versions (English and Turkish) to make sure majority of the sample can make sense of every item. In addition, a structured interview, which consisted of 12 questions, was carried out to investigate the lecturers' opinions and their observations regarding students' cheating behaviors as well as to triangulate the data collected from the questionnaire.

3. Results

Table 1 shows the results of students' opinions on the first part of the questionnaire. As can be seen, students' response concerning their involvement in cheating and their use of likely methods of cheating indicates that except for items 10 and 11 was negative. There is a possibility that they might have interpreted these two items 'helping others at exams' and 'sharing assignments with other students' as friendly help such as giving their friends and classmates pens, pencils, erasers or sharing projects and homework assigned as group work with them, rather than considering them as an act of cheating. Therefore, it might be noted that most of the items simply elicited a 'No' response from the students. Furthermore, almost half of the students reported that they were not familiar with penalties for cheaters on exams or assignments (item 12).

Table 1. Students' responses to the first part of the questionnaire

| No. | Since you came to this university, have you ever . . . | Yes (%) | No (%) |
|-----|---|---------|--------|
| 1 | received help from other students during exam sessions? | 28 | 72 |
| 2 | looked at another student's paper during an exam? | 27 | 73 |
| 3 | asked others to do your assignments? | 30 | 70 |
| 4 | paid others to do your projects or assignments? | 6 | 94 |
| 5 | copied information from the Internet without referencing? | 35 | 65 |
| 6 | used mobile phones for cheating? | 8 | 92 |
| 7 | used unauthorized crib notes on exams? | 13 | 87 |
| 8 | learned about a test from students who have already taken the test? | 36 | 66 |
| 9 | lied to a professor to get extension for a make-up exam? | 10 | 90 |
| 10 | helped others during exams? | 58 | 42 |
| 11 | shared your homework with other students? | 62 | 38 |
| 12 | heard of penalties for students who cheat on exams? | 46 | 54 |

In addition, students' responses to the second part of the questionnaire show that overall students justified their cheating in different ways. For example, majority reported that they cheat because others cheat, society is corrupt and even their teachers were cheaters when they were students. Though most of the students did not feel good while cheating, they justified their action by attributing it to the difficulty of lessons, the need to keep their scholarships, and the need to have better job opportunities in the future. Additionally, they referred to the phenomenon of grade inflation and the fact that grades are becoming more important than learning for the sake of understanding and enhancing one's knowledge. They also believed that their cheating would not hurt anyone. Surprisingly enough, though, they agreed that it is not possible to curb cheating at the university level. Furthermore, majority considered cheaters to be smart people in their culture and they would do anything to get ahead if they were given the chance for example buying certificates.

Table 2. Students' responses to the second part of the questionnaire

| No. | Statements | Mean | Std. |
|-----|---|------|-------|
| 13 | I cheat because every student cheats. | 3.43 | 1.329 |
| 14 | I cheat because I don't have time to study. | 2.87 | .986 |
| 15 | I cheat because I am afraid to fail. | 3.67 | 1.424 |
| 16 | I cheat because it hurts no one. | 3.34 | 1.300 |
| 17 | I cheat because my teachers are not tough on cheating. | 2.83 | 1.030 |
| 18 | I cheat because I don't like my teachers. | 2.57 | .908 |
| 19 | I cheat because this university is not very tough on cheating. | 2.63 | .916 |
| 20 | I cheat because lessons are difficult. | 3.50 | 1.353 |
| 21 | I cheat because grades are more important than learning. | 3.33 | 1.336 |
| 22 | I cheat because the lessons are meaningless. | 2.90 | 1.163 |
| 23 | I cheat because I want to keep my scholarship. | 3.81 | 1.555 |
| 24 | I cheat because my family is not very tough on cheating. | 2.80 | 1.040 |
| 25 | I cheat because I only need the certificate. | 2.96 | 1.204 |
| 26 | I cheat because the lessons are irrelevant to my future career. | 3.03 | 1.259 |
| 27 | I cheat to have a better job employment in the future. | 2.95 | 1.239 |
| 28 | I cheat because I am under peer pressure. | 2.84 | 1.113 |
| 29 | I believe everybody cheats in the society. | 4.13 | 1.407 |
| 30 | I believe that my teachers were cheaters when they were students. | 4.50 | 1.427 |
| 31 | I believe we cannot stop cheating at this university. | 3.83 | 1.488 |
| 32 | I feel good when I cheat. | 3.01 | 1.241 |
| 33 | I feel bad when I get caught cheating. | 4.47 | 1.541 |
| 34 | In my country, cheaters are looked at as smart people. | 3.27 | 1.391 |
| 35 | I study but I also cheat to increase my score. | 3.67 | 1.478 |
| 36 | I would buy a certificate or credential if I could. | 3.26 | 1.443 |
| 37 | I would let my students cheat if I were a teacher. | 3.70 | 1.495 |

Moreover, thematic analysis of the data on the lecturers' interview revealed some major findings. They stated that their students cheat, and their agreement fell within a range of 10 to 85%. For example, one lecturer expressed his opinion as follows:

Excerpt 1: "They do sometimes. Usually if it's an important test, exam or a project they attempt to cheat; 50% to 60% of the class attempts".

As to the signs and symptoms of students' cheating, the lecturers reported to have a good ability to identify cheaters or those who tend to cheat. One lecturer stated that:

Excerpt 2: "In many cases, I can recognize cheaters from visual signs like their eye movements, head turns, blushes as well as sound signs like whispering, joking and grumbling".

While they named variety of techniques and methods their students resort to for cheating, majority of the lecturers responded positively to the question asking them if they confront cheaters. One lecturer, for instance, reacted surprisingly that:

Excerpt 3: "I always confront them. Why? Because cheating is illegal!"

More than 80% of the lecturers also believed that students are not aware of academic integrity or 'honour code'. One of the lecturers commented that:

Excerpt 4: "Even if they do, there is a need to remind them about this code of conduct, especially the one concerns academic integrity".

In addition, lecturers gave a list of reasons for students' cheating. For example, they reported that students don't study, skip classes, come to class unprepared, have a low level of English and strive for higher grades at any price. Some of them also believed students are lazy and lack self-confidence or motivation to study. Interviewees also stated that they prefer not to give students take-home exams because they do not trust them to work on their own:

Excerpt 5: "We give homework very often but never take home exams. When students take the task home, they rarely try to do it on their own and they are not aware that teachers can understand it."

Furthermore, almost all lecturers reported that they discuss the risks of cheating on the tests and assignments in their classes, especially before tests and quizzes, though several of them were not aware of these institutional rules and regulations themselves. Finally, several lecturers believed that there should be a zero-tolerance policy for any type of cheating. For example, one of them commented as follows:

Excerpt 6: "Well-determined and disseminated organizational culture may prevent academic dishonesty. Creating awareness could be the solution."

4. Discussion and Conclusions

In response to the first research question, students reported that they had not cheated since they came to this university. However, statements that aimed at finding out about their inclination or predisposition towards cheating revealed that these students had a strong propensity to cheat, which might imply that they have not internalized the principles of academic honesty and integrity; instead, they are waiting for the right time to be able to cheat.

As far as the second research question is concerned, some differences in the methods and reasons for cheating between male and female students were identified. Although the literature on cheating reports that females are more committed to follow the academic regulations and rules than males (e.g., Crown & Spiller, 1998; Whitley, 1998), the results of this study indicates that there is no significant difference between these two groups in terms of the amount of cheating and, in contrast, in some cases females reported even more cheating than males. Thus, it could be concluded that cheating might be sexless and everybody might have the potential for that. However, more males

than females had excuses for cheating and this gap was wider with respect to the items addressing social and cultural factors. For example, males agreed more strongly than females with items 14, 25, 28, 35, 36, and 37 that refer to the traditional and cultural expectations of them to start work right after their graduation, which could result in feeling the need to cheat as a prerogative.

In addition, in response to the third question, students' responses were challenged by the faculty's reports due to the mismatch between what they stated and what their lecturers observed. This was endorsed by several students' comments to open-ended questions, as they believed majority of students are involved in or obsessed with cheating.

The findings of this study might imply that universities should launch some awareness-raising campaigns through seminars, posters and banners in order to magnify the importance of quality in education in the eyes of students as well as faculty members due to the value of training honest educated young people who can handle tomorrow's economic, social and educational challenges. This will undoubtedly need a healthy educational environment and campus culture in which lecturers have positive attitudes towards academic honesty and are committed to reducing the students' propensity to cheat (Crown and Spiller, 1998; Rebecca, Laura & Matthew, 2008; Whitely, 1998). Therefore, while "Faculty tends to underestimate the amount of cheating in their classes" (Al-Qaisy, 2008, p. 144), their behavior during exam sessions and in the classroom, the type of questions and tests they design as well as the way they assign homework can minimize or maximize students' propensity to cheat. Thus, no matter how hard we as faculty members try to be strict, we should remember that temptation for cheating is always around and it is our responsibility to fight it through raising the standards and quality of what we teach and test.

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